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AUTHOR Marsh, David
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines points in oral test interviews where an interviewee explicitly seeks clarification from the interviewer on the content of a question posed, prior to attempting to answer a question. Some of the interviews are drawn from the Finnish Foreign Language Diploma for Professional Purposes examination (Tyoelaman kielidiplomi); others are taken from foreign language test data collected at the Finnish Broadcasting Corporation (YLE). In each oral test interview, the interviewer was a native speaker of English (British or North American) and the interviewees, generally highly educated professionals, were native speakers of Finnish or Finland-Swedish. Four ways of seeking clarification were identified: (1) requests for partial clarification of the points raised in a question; (2) requests for full clarification of the points; (3) requests for clarification of terms; and (4) requests for clarification though nonverbal/paralinguistic signalling. The findings raised more questions than answers. It is suggested that the English native speaker interviewers in the sample attempted to place the test interview in an informal conversational mode, which was partially rejected by the Finnish interviewee. However, an intercultural difference in attitudes toward appropriate styles of discourse in the foreign language oral test interview may have been uncovered. (LB)

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SEEKING CLARIFICATION IN ORAL TESTS

David Marsh
University of Jyväskylä

Introduction

This paper examines points in oral test interviews where an interviewee explicitly seeks clarification from the interviewer on the content of a question posed, prior to attempting to answer a question. Some of the interviews are drawn from the Finnish Foreign Language Diploma for Professional Purposes examination (Työelämän kielidiplomi). Others are taken from foreign language test data collected at the Finnish Broadcasting Corporation (YLE).

Background

The two situations represented in the sample data vary to some extent. The Finnish Foreign Language Diploma test interview was part of an extensive language test, but to which the bulk of the interviewees had been invited to attend. This was because at the time that the interviews took place the test was in its infancy. However, we can assume that the interviewees had particular interest in performing as well as possible in order to receive a high overall test grade.

The foreign language oral test interviews conducted at the Finnish Broadcasting Corporation were significant in that they were, to some extent, gate-keeping situations. This is because the test being administered was an integral part of a selection process for career advancement.

Participants

In each oral test interview (TKD: one to one; YLE: one to two), the interviewer is a native-speaker of English (British or North American) and the interviewees

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were native-speakers of Finnish or Finland-Swedish. The interviewers are experienced teachers of English language, though not all have an academic background in either English language or applied linguistics. The interviewees are generally highly-educated and experienced in their respective fields of administration, business and the media.

Objectives

In this study, an attempt was made to determine whether those points in the dialogues where the interviewee is apparantly unprepared to answer a question without further information being supplied by the interviewer fall into specifiable functional categories. This was done because it was noted that, in the sample data, the Finnish interviewees were repeatedly seeking clarification in response to certain types of question, and more notably, whilst engaged in interaction with certain interviewers.

In order to determine why this was happening, an investigation was made into whether identification of certain functional categories related to seeking clarification, might indicate differences in frames of reference held by specific interviewers, and interviewees, in the oral interviews.

Data comparison

At the same time at which the two types of sample data used in this study were recorded, namely that of English native-speaker interviewers and Finnish interviewees, comparison data was also collected.

The comparison data comprises interviews between Finnish interviewers and a range of foreign interviewees, in which English language is used. This data was recorded in a Finnish Broadcasting Corporation studio, using interviewers drawn from the YLE sample described above. The interviews were recorded so as to be of a high enough quality, in terms of both content and recording, for TV transmission. The topics discussed varied, but were face-threatening to some extent, especially those relating to an impending war in Iraq and Kuwait. The interviewees were from Britain, Egypt, North America, the Soviet Union and

Syria. They were generally high-level professionals working in a range of diplomatic, educational and political posts. The interviews were held in English.

The comparative data was examined from a sole perspective; namely, to observe situations in which the interviewer is Finnish, in order to determine whether non-Finnish interviewees also seek clarification to the same extent as found in the sample data.

Findings

The comparative data revealed very few instances of interviewees' seeking clarification.

Four ways of seeking clarification were identified in the sample data. The first of these involves the interviewee seeking partial clarification of the points raised in a question. Here, it appears that the interviewee understands the overall content of the question posed, but wishes the interviewer to specify more precisely what information s/he seeks, before offering an answer.

Seeking partial clarification

a Interviewer: "Is MTV lowering standards of TV in Finland?"
Interviewee: "Do you mean Finnish MTV?

b Interviewer: "If you could double your salary and move anywhere in the world for a minimum of one year, which country would you choose?"
Interviewee: "Doing what I'm doing now?"

c Interviewer: "Do you have high hopes of the Summit, I mean, in terms of your general attitudes to this situation?"
Interviewee: "So you mean, the situation in Iraq, do I wait for something, some results?"

d Interviewer: "What have you been doing before you started your own company?"
Interviewee: "Well, that's a long story."
Interviewer: "Well, what about your job before?"

The second way of seeking clarification found in the interview data, appears to involve the interviewee requesting a full clarification of the information requested.

Seeking full clarification

a Interviewer: "How do you feel?"
Interviewee: "About what, the test?"

b Interviewer: "What have you been doing this morning?"
Interviewee: "Doing?"
Interviewer: "What time did you start?"
Interviewee: "Here?"

c Interviewer: "So, we'd like you just to talk now".
Interviewee: "Talk about what?"

d Interviewer: "Why does one get the impression that President Koivisto is not often interviewed by Yleisradio people but is often interviewed by commercial TV and radio?"
Interviewee: "Do one get such an impression?"
Interviewer: "I've heard it said. I don't know if there is any truth to that."

These were the two most common types of request for clarification, but two others also feature in the data, namely, seeking clarification of terms, and through a distinct form of non-verbal/paralinguistic signalling.
In the following example, two ways of seeking clarification may be operating. The first in "Well, yes, but, er..." may be the start of a request for partial clarification. The interviewer interrupts the interviewee with a follow-up question which is responded to with a request for clarification of terms, in this case the name of a foreign journalist.

Seeking clarification of terms

Interviewer: "Are there any particular correspondents, either Finnish or foreign, that you particularly admire?"
Interviewee: "Well, yes, but, (er
Interviewer: "I) know the problem, can't get the right name at the right time! What about Oriana Fallaci?"
Interviewee: "Who is that?"

In the following example the use of non-verbal/paralinguistic signalling was used in which the interviewee, through silence and non-verbal cues, encourages the interviewer to reformulate the question posed until a satisfactory statement is delivered.

Seeking clarification through non-verbal/paralinguistic signalling

Interviewer: "What about your future?"
"Have you got any idea?"
"Would you probably stay in p.r.?"
Interviewee: "Yes, I think so."

Conclusions

The findings described above raise more questions than answers. But this does not negate the value of the study described, because the frequency of and ways in which Finnish interviewees seek clarification may be indicative of possible flaws in the interaction. What follows is speculative discussion of why this may be the case.

This discussion may be usefully framed by three statements made by Finnish interviewees, in retrospective comment on oral interviews found in the sample data:

- "This was not an interview, it was not anything at all."
- "I suppose I wasn't sure quite what he wanted."
- "At the beginning he said he just wanted us to talk."

It is possible that the English native-speaker interviewers in the sample data attempt to place the ensuing test interview into an informal conversational mode, which appears to be partially rejected by the Finnish interviewee. Thus, a form of conversational dilemma may be occuring, which is signalled at those points at which clarification is sought. It is possible that this may occur because the questions are framed according to rather vague small talk procedures, eg. "How do you feel?", which the interviewee considers inappropriate for the situation, namely that of an oral test interview. Rather vague questions are also used in the comparative data, yet there the

interviewee tends to respond in one way or another, sometimes by using the question as a means of introducing another topic, but rarely rejecting the question or insisting that it be qualified.

Perhaps the interviewer in the sample data is trying to make the interaction overtly characterized by consensus, whereas because of certain obvious situational constraints, the situation is viewed by the Finnish interviewee as characterized by dissensus.

There are alternative ways of suggesting why the seeking of clarification should be found so often in the sample data. However, on the basis of this enquiry, this author suggests that in these situations, subjects do not share the same conceptual frame through which contributions are to be understood by both parties.

Disregarding those questions which are explicitly not understood in terms of linguistic content, it may be suggested that there are points in the dialogue where interpretation of the weighting towards transactional (information transfer) and interactional (developing and maintaining interpersonal relations) function, is not shared by interviewer and interviewee alike. If this is found to be the case in other enquiries on oral interviews between Finnish and non-Finnish interactants, an intercultural difference may have been uncovered in attitudes towards appropriate styles of discourse in the foreign language oral test interview.